

No, It's Not Your Opinion

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Thomas Northcut/Thinkstock

I have had so many conversations or email exchanges with students in the last few years wherein I anger them by indicating that simply saying, "This is my opinion" does not preclude a connected statement from being dead wrong. It still baffles me that some feel those four words somehow give them carte blanche to spout [wacky] oratory or prose.

I spend far more time arguing on the Internet than can possibly be healthy, and the word I've come to loath more than any other is "opinion". Opinion, or worse "belief", has become the shield of every poorly-conceived notion that worms its way onto social media.

There's a common conception that claiming "It's just my opinion" is a get out of jail free card. However, before you crouch behind your Shield of Opinion, you need to ask yourself two questions.

1. Is this actually an opinion?

the first category of opinions that Professor Stokes talks about

2. If it is an opinion, how informed is it and why do I hold it?

I'll help you with the first part. **An opinion is a preference for or judgment of something.** My favorite color is black. I think mint tastes awful. *Doctor Who* is the best television show. These are all opinions. They may be unique to me alone or massively shared across the general population but **they all have one thing in common; they cannot be verified outside of the fact that I believe them.**

the second category of opinions that Professor Stokes talks about

There's nothing wrong with an opinion on those things. The problem comes from people whose **opinions are actually misconceptions.** If you think vaccines cause autism you are expressing something factually wrong, not an opinion. The fact that you may still believe that vaccines cause autism does not move your misconception into the realm of valid opinion. Nor does the fact that many others share this opinion give it any more validity.

To quote [John Oliver](#), who on his show *Last Week Tonight* referenced a [Gallup poll](#) showing one in four Americans believe climate change isn't real:

You don't need people's opinion on a fact. You might as well have a poll asking: "Which number is bigger, 15 or 5?" or "Do owls exist?" or "Are there hats?"

Yes, sometimes scientific or historical data are wrong or unclear or in need of further examination. And we can all form an opinion in a bubble. For the first couple of decades of our lives, we all do.

However, eventually we are going to venture out into the world and find that what we thought was an informed assessment was actually just a tiny thought based on very little data and your feelings.

Many of our opinions will turn out to be uninformed or just flat out wrong. No, the fact that we believed something doesn't make it any more valid or worthwhile, and nobody owes our viewpoint any respect simply because it is ours. We are not entitled to an opinion unless the opinion is merely our preference.

[NOTE: This article has been modified.](#)